

# INCONGRUENCE IN THEORY AND PRACTICE: BLACK ENGLISH VERNACULAR AS USED IN SOCIETY AND EDUCATION

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## ABSTRACT

*In U.S. education, Standard English is the preferred dialect. The problem of the requirement of a Standard English dialect and how it reduces opportunity for those who do not utilize it has been discussed, yet no plausible and effective solutions have been proposed. Speakers of Black English Vernacular (BEV) are especially vulnerable to this discrimination and are the subject of this work. Educational institutions must no longer punish students for speaking BEV; a change in the educational paradigm is required. Equal marks must be provided for work that is equal even if it is expressed in a different dialect.*

## INTRODUCTION

While sociolinguists study the interactional mechanisms that create inequality they can often overlook the consequences of these processes (Philips, 2006), this research focuses on addressing the latter. Sociolinguistics has acknowledged the prevalence of dialect differences between classes in many regions of the world (Labov, 1966). These patterns have been observed in areas like India, England, Belgium, France, Canada, and many other places. For example, in Belgium, dialect is seen as a marker of social distance, separating the lower and higher classes (van de Broeck, 1977). In higher education in America, the mode of communication largely represents that which is commonly found in the upper class, Standard English, the archolect or high language (McArthur, 2005). However, research shows that the adoption of a certain way of speaking does not have a large effect on intelligence (Bernstein, 1971). This argument should not be construed as conflicting with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, also known as the Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis (Whorf, 1961), which presupposes that language influences thought, but instead merely says that we cannot say people of a certain dialect are more or less intelligent than people who speak another dialect.

First, it must be understood that linguistic differences are arbitrary. A fork would still be a fork even if it were called a nut (it would still be a pronged utensil used to pick up food even if someone pronounced the word as *nu*'). The sign (word) used is arbitrary in its nature (Saussure, 1959). A sign is merely something which represents something else. Thus, fork is a sign which is used to mean utensil used for eating. That it is called a fork is completely arbitrary. Had past events unfolded differently, we may be using *nuts* instead of *forks* and would not think twice about it. Therefore, it does not matter what the tool is called, it still serves the same purpose. Linguistic differences are arbitrary, meaning, the differences between language systems are unimportant and all language systems are used for the same purpose. It does not matter the order of subjects, verbs, and objects in speech, understanding is still made clear. How unnatural it is though, for monolingual English speakers to see *öeyes greenö* instead of *ögreen eyes.ö*

Understanding the arbitrariness of language is an essential step into reducing linguistic discrimination.

In addition, the construct of an ideal, standard, or substandard language must also be realized. If something was not constructed then it would not change. Just as the meaning of "whiteness" has changed, what is Standard English today is not the same as when the U.S. was founded, nor will it be the same in 100 years. However, language speakers fail to see how language has changed over the years and think that their current taken-for-granted understanding of the proper way to use English is correct, stable and morally right, never realizing that their concept is a construct. Specifically, the English that the founders of America decided to use was their invention and construct of Standard English. Thus, in their minds, they spoke and wrote the proper English. However, much of the colloquialisms they originally used are no longer employed. Many people in the U.S. today use what they believe to be proper English and it is significantly different from early American English used by the founders. Who is/was right? Which is proper English? Now that the realization is made that there can logically be no "correct" English, the idea of punishing those who do not utilize it seems senseless but more so, discriminatory, as will be shown further in this work.

The Global Language Monitor analyzes word usage in the global print (Luke, 2007) and, in 2009, has calculated that English gets a new word every 98 minutes (<http://www.languagemonitor.com/>). This is largely due to words created by the elite as speech patterns or words associated with the elite get and keep positive and legitimate status because of the status of speakers (Bonvillain, 2008). When the lower classes or speakers of stigmatized dialects create a word, it is given less importance and is unlikely to be taken serious by the upper class, even if used in popular speech. However, when an upper class individual creates a word, the new word is believed to have merit and is immediately accepted into the lexicon. According to Marx (1982), in a capitalist society, the most important relations are those which are economic. In that same society, organized around selling labor for wages, the self is determined to a very large extent based on our occupation (Marx, 1982). Thus, the deference that others give to us is largely given because of our status via our occupation. This can be carried over into word creation and thus, linguistic differences. Individuals given higher status, commonly because of their occupation, more often have words which are more easily adopted by others. Chemists, doctors, engineers, those in the computer field and people of high status in other occupations create words which are quickly given merit and are legitimate. This pattern is easily seen in chemistry and medicine when new compounds and diseases are discovered and named—there is little argument over the "legitimacy" of these words. Thus "the inequality of languages originates in economic inequality" (Philips, 2006).

However, some generated phrases may come to mind which seemingly debunk this argument. There are two points that those who would make that argument should understand. One, the perceived "low status" of people creating some words is not low like others believe. For example, take words ending in "izzle" which were created by hip hop artists of much higher status than they are given accord for. Interestingly, the status of most of their words suffer a lower meaning than those created by other elitists, probably because of the stigma these individuals have. Some researchers argue that hip hop has much influence on speech patterns of those living in urban regions (Morgan, 2001), I do not disagree but posit that the majority of creations that come from this music, though spoken by many, are still not thought of as Standard

English and are not considered proper speech. Thus, words created by high status (wealth, power, and prestige) members of stigmatized or lower ranking groups retain a stigmatized status. They are used but most are not considered real words. Second, far fewer words that are created by the underclass than the upper classes gain acceptance. Interestingly, some of the few words created by the African American community which have been granted incorporation into Standard English or at least into the lexicon of people who claim to speak Standard English are now taken for granted. For example, giving someone *õfiveö* (Rickford, 1997) or slapping palms in congratulation or agreement, seems to be part of American culture yet, as many people are surprised to learn, it was adopted from African American culture. This incorporation is not representative of most other African American created words. The valuation, or devaluation, of ways of speaking, according to Bourdieu (1977) and others (Philips, 2006), is directly linked to the valuing of some people over others.

The dialect which will be examined in length here is Black English Vernacular (BEV) though examples from other dialects and language groups in the United States are examined as the thesis to this work applies to other ways of speaking, besides BEV. Though discrimination based on the ideology of a standard language is significant in areas like the legal process, media, and workplace (Lippi-Green, 2009), the scope of this work resounds in education. The idea behind this scope is to offer a starting place for change with the knowledge that change will also need to be made in these and other areas. This work goes on to focus on the views of others on speakers of this dialect, what the literature offers for solutions to these problems, and what can be done to address issues of students who speak/write this dialect being awarded poorer grades for equal content.

### **Black English Vernacular Background and Meaning, How Others View Speakers**

Speaking in BEV has been largely examined already and much research shows it to be a dialect of English which began as a creole of African slaves (Labov, 1982; Bonvillain, 2008). However, other research posits that its beginnings were likely very similar to varieties of English spoken by post-colonial Anglo-Americans (Hyatt, 1970-1978; Viereck, 1988; Ewers, 1996). Yet other scholars believe it to be derived from regional southern speech (Bonvillain, 2008). As there is by no means a consensus on the origins of the dialect, research seems to support these perspectives (Wolfram, Thomas, and Green, 2000).

Today, especially in the United States, users of BEV are still stigmatized for speaking *õimproper Englishö* or are viewed as *õlacking civility, cultural graces, or good tasteö* (Fordham, 1999:276). Using BEV marks the speakers as members of a group that is incompetent (unable *õto perform a [white] culturally sanctioned task;ö* Fordham, 1999:287) even though researchers have shown that the rules used in BEV are not random or idiosyncratic but resemble those widely utilized in other languages, such as use of the invariant *be* (Bonvillain, 2008). Further, negative judgments against BEV are invalid as research shows no language system is more efficient than another (Kottak, 2008). Not only is BEV considered a basilect or low language (McArthur, 2005) but as other English-based dialects are described, it is viewed as *õnot real English but [a] bastard offshoot to be regretted, and kept at arms lengthö* (McArthur, 2005). As a side note, other non-standard dialects are also the victim of such negative ideas. In Hawaii, in 1987, there was a proposed plan which aimed to outlaw Hawaiian Creole English in schools. It was shown that people viewed this non-standard form as fostering illiteracy, speaking lazily and

supporting backward thinking (Lippi-Green, 1999). There is a fierce standard language ideology which sees any deviation as being unintelligent and low.

It is also important to realize the history and meaning behind BEV. On page two, Smitherman notes that it is "Euro-American speech with an Afro-American meaning, nuance, tone, and gesture [reflecting] the conditions of [Black] servitude, oppression and life in America" (Fordham, 1999). Speaking BEV, even when pressured by school officials to conform, illustrates resistance to be "mastered by" definitions of caste built into the [White] semantic/social system" (Holt, 1972:54). Speaking BEV is a way of giving the underclass a voice, a voice that says "I acknowledge that my people have been oppressed, in this way, I will resist that and not become a part of the entity which has doled out so much unfair treatment." Further, eighty-percent of American Blacks speak BEV at least sometimes (Smitherman, 1977) which can be interpreted as a rejection of the historical tool through which Black dehumanization, "Othering," enslavement, and oppression has been carried out (Fordham, 1999). In addition, a growing number of whites and other minorities also speak in this manner and are subject to similar sanction. As well, the treatment of those who speak BEV replicates the work done by Du Bois (1899) in which he identified reasons for why blacks have been not be integrated into the mainstream culture after slavery. He reasoned that this was caused by racial prejudice, the exclusion of blacks and the inability to become involved in mainstream society in the midst of white supremacy, which lingers today (Anderson, 1999) and can be seen as corresponding reasons why BEV speakers are treated unfairly. Du Bois (1903) also famously identified the problem of the color line, in which I posit, language is an ultimate identifier of one's position on one side of the line, aside from appearance. Though I revisit these power relationships later their effect is evident in many sections of this work.

*Institutions Force Students to Learn and Use the Dialect Based on the Preferred Speech of the Higher Classes ("Ideal Dialect") and Ignore Theory*

A basic construct of U.S. schools' view of language and educational philosophy is the standard language ideology (Lippi-Green, 2009). This requirement of a dialect based on the preferred speech of the higher classes, which is formal/elaborated, reduces opportunity and discriminates linguistically for those who do not adopt such a speaking style and instead utilize a more public/restricted code (Bernstein, 1971; Hymes, 1996). Although many of our colleagues agree that a goal of post-secondary education is to teach a "proper" grapholect/dialect (the English archolect), researchers have shown that grapholect and dialect certainly do not match in many individuals and that neither significantly impacts thinking ability in terms of intelligence (Bernstein, 1971). In fact, when researchers "translated" questions from the Boehm Test of Basic Concepts into BEV, young children in elementary school performed significantly better (Williams, 1997). In addition, in a study which examined the rapport that speaking BEV can build in college classrooms, a teacher spent some class time doing "performance" where BEV style was used. Resulting student engagements were much more participatory and students contributed more spontaneously to discussion (Foster, 1995).

Forcing Standard English "deletes the richness of their linguistic constructions and by extension aspects of the students' Black selves" (Fordham, 1999:279). This still occurs even though the school board in Oakland, California passed a resolution aimed at informing and training educators of the legitimacy of BEV. It read:

The Superintendent shall devise and implement the best possible academic program for imparting instruction to African-American students in their primary language for the combined purpose of maintaining the legitimacy and richness of such language. (*The Black Scholar*, 1997:4)

Furthermore, teachers' disdain for Black students' linguistic practices silences and kills their academic effort (Smitherman, 1977). In fact, when there is a language barrier between teachers who speak Standard English and students who speak BEV, it exists in the form of unconscious negative attitudes formed by teachers toward children who spoke AAVE [also known as BEV], and the reactions of children to those attitudes (Labov, 1982:193). Thus, linguistic problems that children have are seen rightly as resulting from the children's consciousness of their teachers' negative opinions and the children's subsequent rejection of their teachers' demands (Bonvillain, 2008). In addition, the rejection by teachers of students who used non-standard forms (Bonvillain, 2008) adds to this issue. It is also not out of the question to mention the possibility of poor treatment of students due to their culture as a whole, for a positive evaluation of AAVE [BEV] was correlated with other positive attitudes toward distinctive African-American culture [and] political involvement (Bonvillain, 2008:173). Further, contributions of minority children are not incorporated into the creation of educational realities the way the contribution of their white counterparts are (Philips, 2006). Thus, it is inappropriate to blame BEV for the problems these children encounter in school (Labov, 1972).

This leaves us with the question, why do higher education institutions ignore what has been shown in the literature? Though many professors agree with the information presented thus far, the requirement of forcing students to adopt an ideal dialect is still in practice. Students speaking their native dialect of BEV are denied educational opportunities by the higher classes (Gumperz, 1971) and are tracked for failure (Fordham, 1999:278) while students who conform to Standard English enhance their learning potential. To be successful in school, these students must adopt the practices that they see as inadequate and lacking expression (Scheurich, 1993). These students view the school as being unreceptive to them and further adopt the code of the street and BEV to gain positive affect from and develop solidarity (Bonvillain, 2008) with individuals as they see teachers and staff being unwilling to give it (Anderson, 1999). To them, the mission of the school becomes questionable (Anderson, 1999). For schools to teach well and help students learn educators must unlearn concepts like racism and colonialization, which have been ingrained in educators and others since childhood (bell hooks, 1994). Doing so will assist a person in become free to learn (bell hooks, 1994) and inherently reduce language ideology discrimination of BEV speakers and improve grading discrepancies based on dialect.

*Standardization: 'But I Can Not Understand What They Say!'*

In justifying the discrimination mentioned thus far, many use standardization as a scapegoat. Those who have negative ideas about speakers of BEV argue that they can not understand what BEV speakers say. Thus, standardization is used as a reason for those who speak BEV to conform to the elites' idea of what is the "right" speech. This standard language ideology has also been the cause of legal troubles. For using dialects other than Standard English, many have been fired for not speaking "like normal people with normal language" as was seen in the case of *Dercach v. Indiana Department of Highways* in 1987.

Of course, students speaking BEV are not the only students punished. For example, Mendoza-Denton (2008) recounts the ways students are classified into English, Limited English Proficient (LEP), or Fluent English Proficient (FEP) in California. If a parent responded to just one of the following four items with a language other than English, the student would be classified as a LEP or FEP. This is important because "these acronyms played a large role in determining and predicting a student's educational opportunities" (Mendoza-Denton, 2008:34). Parents were required to answer the following four questions given by the California Department of Education in 1995 (Mendoza-Denton, 2008:32) :

- 1) Which language did your son or daughter learn when he or she first began to talk?
- 2) What language does your son or daughter most frequently use at home?
- 3) What language do you use most frequently to speak to your son or daughter?
- 4) Name the language most often spoken by adults at home.

Students with the classification of LEP were unable to take classes for college credit, to be moved from LEP required various things like passing written tests. However, even students who passed this criteria could still be prevented from obtaining FEP categorization if they failed a class, "even a non-academic class like Woodshop, or Physical Education" (Mendoza-Denton, 2008:34) or if they received a complaint from a teacher stating they were not functioning, for example if they were "disruptive in class" (Mendoza-Denton, 2008:34). Thus, non-linguistic measures were used to measure linguistic ability! Mendoza-Denton (2008:35) noted that students she observed in a high school in California repeatedly suffered from "erroneous placement [in proficiency categories] and stereotyping."

While the former has been addressed, a student (Bexley, 1994) provided an excellent example of the latter in a letter written in the school's newspaper. The student was doing poorly in Biology and the student's parent attended a parent-teacher conference. When the parent spoke to the teacher, she did so in a thick accent. The student's teacher then told the mother that the students at the high school come from diverse schools and that her child's school must have not provided good preparation for the course. However, the mother replied that, in fact, her child had attended a prestigious school in a nearby affluent town where the student earned a 4.0 grade point average. In the words of the student author, the teacher was "stupefied." The teacher then apologized and explained that he thought the parent was "someone else's mother." The student author describes the event as "pitiful" and inferred that her teacher "made an obviously racist assumption" that she had attended an "inferior" school because her parent was Hispanic, causing her problems in the biology course. The student concludes, "it doesn't stop there, though. I've seen it time and time again, and it all gets swept under the rug by the administration who likes to focus their efforts on the prestigious, rich, white kids at Sor Juana." (Mendoza-Denton, 2008:36)

Other students recall, "here they make us do basic math that I already knew. Just because I don't know English" (Mendoza-Denton, 2008:22). Thus it is seen that linguistic ability is used to measure other abilities, such as that as mathematical competence which further hurts the academic careers of these students.

Some of these students who speak English very well decide against speaking it. Similarly to their BEV speaking counterparts, these students say they would be shunning more than a linguistic code by opting for English, even disapproving of code-switching (Mendoza-Denton, 2008:38).

## SOLUTIONS OFFERED IN THE LITERATURE

### *Code-switching: Ramifications of Culture and Power*

Code-switching, which Fordham (1999) calls "leaving" in this specific sense, between the two dialects is often offered as a means to resolve the issue. Code-switching (Anderson, 1999) involves behaving according to a certain type of rules, depending on the situation at hand. Here the choices are dialect and the situation is whether the student is at home or school. However, it can be difficult, and when friends of a code-switcher recognize what they are doing, the code-switchers are further stigmatized for acting "white" (Fordham, 1996; Fordham and Ogbu 1986) or "proper." This is seen for at least two reasons. The first is that language is the medium of group identity which bonds people into a social group (Holt, 1972). Code-switching is often seen as "delegitimizing" the African American Cultural system (Fordham, 1999). The second is that Standard "English" is seen as white; it is what is allowed in White Public Space (Hill, 1999) and anything that is not white (BEV) is excluded. Whiteness is what the core life in the U.S. is centered around (Fordham, 1999). Thus, whiteness is seen as an "invisible and unmarked norm" (Hill, 1999). This is not a coincidence, "what is seen as normal is a product of power" (Foucault, 1977; Fiske, 1993; Fordham, 1999). "Acting white, then, is a metaphor for power relationships that addressed the historical exclusions of Black Americans from the core of U.S. life through the institutionalization of what the larger society calls "all-American" norms" (Fordham, 1999:279).

Since the founding of the United States, eloquence in Standard English has been used as a tool to recommend people to other citizens and was a sign of being American (Battistella, 2005). This is problematic, of course, for what is viewed as American is not all inclusive but rests in the valuation of whites as being true American. In order for Blacks to be seen as powerful, their identities must be dissolved (Fordham, 1999) and they must adopt the linguistic styles of their oppressors.

Further, in 1974:1 the Conference on College Composition and Communication adopted the following into their books:

We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language -- the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans. A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage of dialects. We affirm

strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language.

As stated, these ideas have not been put in place and our students still suffer. Policymakers and teachers, perhaps unwittingly, have succumbed to the hegemonic language ideology of the upper class; in fact, language has been the tool of hegemony in the U.S. (Hymes, 1996). "The educational market is strictly dominated by the linguistic products of the dominant class" (Bourdieu, 1982:62) and sanctions and replicates the preexisting economic differences. Thus, schools punishing of students who do not utilize Standard English, via lower grades and other mechanisms, directly reproduces social inequality. Yet the educational system operates under the guise of fairness and blames the student for failing even though the school fails students for their culture manifested in their dialect; the social institution of education says, "all have equal opportunity to acquire membership in the privileged linguistic network. If they fail, it is their fault, not that of the society of school" (Hymes, 1996:84). Hymes (1996) explains:

Class stratification and cultural assumptions about language converge in schooling to reproduce the social order. A latent function of the educational system is to instill linguistic insecurity, to discriminate linguistically, to channel children in ways that have an integral linguistic component, while appearing open and fair to all. (1996:84)

The enforcement of this standard language ideology is linked to social domination, though the invisibility of this link only makes it more effective (Lippi-Green, 2009). The educational system's mask of equality needs to be revealed as unequal so that all can move on and our schools can really begin to offer educational advantages to all, equally. What can be done to bridge the gap between theory and practice? The literature again and again shows dialect can not be used to validly lump people into inferior and superior categories, categories where members speak proper English or improper, unintelligent English.

#### *Minimize Stigmatization of Students' Black Selves*

Fordham (1999) offers the solution for policymakers to minimize stigmatization of the Black self, which she posits will compel BEV to disappear. Though minimizing the stigma of Black identity is surely an interesting and excellent idea, it is not likely to effectually solve this issue. BEV may have been partially created and used to resist oppression but because regional and other group dialect differences appear in every language, it is likely the BEV would continue after stigmatization becomes absent. As well, BEV has become part of black culture for many and maintaining cultural tradition is an important aspect of identity.

#### *Provide Black Youths with History of Standard English and BEV*

Smitherman and Cunningham (1997) did state that students often resort to not-learning or avoidance (Fordham, 1999) as resistance, but that only punishes them. In addition, these students spend less time on studying and homework in English than in all other subjects (Fordham, 1999). To resolve this issue, they (Smitherman and Cunningham, 1997:230-231) suggest providing black youths with the history of Standard English and BEV in hopes of them moving forward and "never having to surrender one language (Black English) for another (Standard English)." There is no evidence to show that this has been done in the schools.



Assuming that some schools have even done this a little, there has been no measurable effect on linguistic discrimination. Educators still routinely lower grades for students who speak and write in BEV. In addition, by providing them with the history of both, which is a good idea but ineffectual for this problem, there is no attacking of the problem of the requirement of Standard English. What would result is further stigmatization if students internalized what the school is saying; "Your way of speaking [thus your self] is fine for you at home, but in public when you talk to people, you should speak the right [white] way [so your self in unacceptable in public situations]." Further, from what could be seen, the authors do not recommend the teaching of the history of both to students who are not black youth. Not only does this again, further stigmatize the speech (and thus selves) by giving the message, "your history can be taught to you, along with white history, but we will teach the whites only white history" but also fails to provide good information which could open the eyes of white students on the oppression and other issues faced by their black counterparts.

### *Dialect Awareness*

There is not adequate research on what students are taught about the ways that language varies (Ramirez et al., 2005). Ramirez et al. (2005) and other researchers (Keleifgen and Bond, 2009) advocate exposing students to different dialects via curricular units and educational tools which expose them to sociolinguistic information and also uses real life dialects in a lesson. While these endeavor is quite laudable and may be useful, these resolutions show no results concerning the negative sanctions students writing in a non-standard form or speaking in a non-standard dialect. Standard English is still the unit used to measure student work, rather than content even if students are taught dialect awareness, it is a double standard, as they are still graded on only one dialect. In effect, this teaches them an internal valuation of dialect, which is good, but they realize that this valuation means nothing because of they way the institution of education is setup, they are still measured against the "proper" way to speak.

## **CONCLUSION**

Education's ultimate goal is to promote higher levels of critical thinking-why is dialect being improperly used as a vehicle to achieve such goals? Even the most notable scholars are still stuck on the idea that it is perfectly acceptable to measure all students against one arbitrary linguistic code. It seems then, to invoke praxis, the application of theory, we must no longer punish students for speaking or writing BEV; a change in the complete educational paradigm is required. Students should receive equal marks for identical content even if the dialect they choose to express themselves in is different. No longer should "it is my job to teach you how to write Standard English" be a cop-out for the allowance of institutional discrimination in the educational field. This pluralistic view should also be applied to other fields and institutions like the media, law, entertainment, and employers, as to ensure discrimination is eliminated in those areas as well. Education and these areas should begin to overlap into the family. If the bloc which promotes the standard language ideology can be taken down then it is likely that black students who now feel they cannot achieve in school and be accepted by their peers will start to see these two desires as no longer incompatible.

My current research, not included in this study, answers the call made by Ramirez et al and documents the extent to which students have been provided information on other dialects, the extent that their dialect is used as a tool to carry out discrimination, and the extent to which institutions certifying teachers incorporate teachings on how to address linguistic diversity. This current work makes the case that, though strategies have been suggested, currently they are not changing the educational institution in a significant way; it is this authors contribution that the most effective way to reduce linguistic discrimination is to grade on content rather than linguistic medium.

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